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SUBJECT: PRAGMATIC CONCERNS TAKE PRECEDENCE FOR NK DEFECTORS

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) During a June 26-28 leadership camp sponsored by NGO Citizens' Alliance for North Korea Human Rights (Citizens' Alliance), 16 young North Korean defectors received the message of democratic activism. However, more pragmatic advice on adjusting to South Korean society captivated their attention. END SUMMARY.

LEADERSHIP CAMP FOR DEFECTOR YOUTH

¶2. (SBU) As one of its myriad projects in support of North Korean defectors, the Seoul-based Citizens' Alliance, a private NGO, sponsored a three-day camp for North Korean youth with leadership potential. As explained to us by Citizens' Alliance Secretary General Kim Young-ja, resettled North Koreans are expected to play a key future role in mediating the relationship between North and South Koreans in a unified Korea. Thus, she explained, it is vital to identify potential leaders, educate them about democratic values and provide them with the leadership skills necessary for their success. Sixteen resettled North Koreans participated in the leadership camp, which was held near Seoul June 26 to 28. They were all college students: nine were Chinese majors, three studied theology or religious education, and one each studied in the fields of Business, English, Nursing, and Visual Arts. POL's Korean-speaking intern joined the group as an observer.

DEMOCRACY ACTIVIST FACES TOUGH CROWD

¶3. (SBU) Ana Mosneagu, an International Republican Institute (IRI) representative from Romania, was the event's featured speaker. As an expert on the democracy movement in Romania, Mosneagu explained her country's transition from a closed communist regime to a more open, free state, and the role of the citizens who chose to participate in bringing about regime change

¶4. (SBU) Mosneagu pushed the group to envision change in North Korea and asked them their thoughts on the DPRK opening to the outside world. Most responded that change would be difficult and take a long time. A twenty-nine year old female student pointed out that middle-aged defectors settled

in the South still distrusted people of different races, and were reluctant to disavow all aspects of the political propaganda that they were taught throughout their lives. "I understand how we want to see change in what North Koreans believe," she explained, "but if you crash into a person's mind with a set of completely different facts and values in matter of weeks, or even days, they break down - or even worse, they might hold on to the old stuff more strongly than ever before."

15. (SBU) A twenty-two year old female defector, a student, added that when she learned that the Korean War was started by the DPRK, "I was so shocked, and I fell ill for several days. If North and South Koreans under a unified Korea fight over something, it could be historical matters such as who started the Korean War." A South Korean moderator suggested that the two peoples would surely fight over investment rights, real estate, land development, to which a defector student replied "most importantly, we will need to decide who gets to represent a unified Korea."

REALISTIC RESPONSES TO BIG QUESTIONS

16. (SBU) Mosneagu kicked off another discussion on "higher ambitions and potential for defector NK youth." Ms. Mosneagu asked, "Who will draft the constitution? Who will revamp the outdated laws? Who will spread the word of democracy to a disconcerted population? Tell me how you will achieve all this ten years from now on." Most of the participants, however, had more immediate concerns. The students majoring in Chinese replied that they chose the major considering the immediate advantages - getting a job in Korea-China trade, teaching Chinese at public schools, as well as freelance interpretation and translation. These students explained that they sought jobs that would give them an immediate advantage over average Koreans. The winning edge, they said, was their first-hand exposure to China and Chinese language, tolerance and sympathy for people in desperate need of education and Christianity. The religious studies majors explained that they chose their majors in the hope of continuing missionary work in China, and helping disadvantaged people in North Korea someday.

17. (SBU) Mosneagu emphasized the importance of English skills. "Fluency in English is crucial to connecting with the outside world, and bringing in newest information, the best government systems and brightest educators from all over the world," Mosneagu observed. While everyone in the room nodded in agreement, they wondered why Mosneagu, even though she spoke English fluently, worked as a political activist and leader of an NGO. "How can you work when you're getting paid so little?" asked a 26-year-old male defector student. Mosneagu replied that "it's not about the money, it's about what I believe."

18. (SBU) The indefatigable Mosneagu urged the students to have more confidence and broader visions as future leaders. Indeed, by the end of the discussion, students were putting out more ambitious job titles such as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Minister of Unification, Minister of National Defense, ROK diplomat in Beijing, or Grand National Party officer.

PARTICIPANTS FOCUS ON FINANCIAL AND LEGAL PROBLEMS

19. (SBU) In contrast to the lukewarm response given to the democracy activist, the participants were keenly interested in a presentation on legal issues facing North Korean defectors. The students peppered the Korean Bar Association representative with questions about debt, loans, inheritance, contracts, tenant rules, real estate, and other financial issues. They were also concerned about marriage laws, especially property co-ownership with the spouse, and laws regulating traffic and car accidents. Most were concerned

about the cost of legal advice and also the legal consequences of Korean identification numbers issued at Hanawon. (Note: The ROKG records the district number of Ansang (2523), where Hanawon is located, as the "birthplace" of defectors. Thus, defectors all have the series "2523" in their identification numbers.).

¶10. (SBU) "We never got education like this at Hanawon," said a 23-year-old female student majoring in Chinese in a major South Korean university. "I have a lot of things to ask a lawyer, but I was afraid it would cost me several million won (thousands of USD)." When asked what she would do with this new information, she replied that she would immediately share it with her friends. However, when asked about becoming a legal expert in the future to help other NK defectors, students answered shyly, "that sounds great, but I don't think I am competent enough." Despite their interest in the legal system, the students expressed the view that the legal profession was an elite group unofficially reserved for only the smartest South Koreans.

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) We hardly fault the organizers for trying, but there was an awkward disconnect throughout much of this leadership camp. The idealism of democratic activism clashed with the hard reality of North Korean defectors, who are desperately trying to adjust to life in the ROK and compete with their South Korean peers. At least for this group of defectors, who represent some of the best and the brightest of the growing defector population, the highest priorities remain paying the bills and getting a job. Spreading democracy and resolving the issues of unification would have to wait until later.
VERSHBOW